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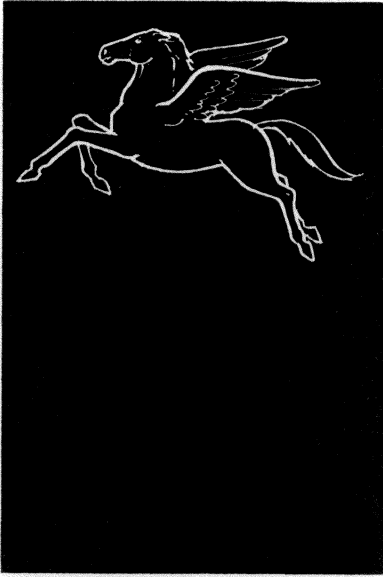
Article 3

The Red Horse

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The Red Horse

by James Witbam

English, Sr.

AGATHA pulled the door open a crack and peered into the dimly lit corridor. She saw and heard no one. Her eyes sparkled. She opened the door further and pushed her head around the door jamb to make sure no one was coming from the other direction. The entire corridor was empty. She went slowly out the door and, without a sound, closed it behind herself. Her bare feet were noiseless on the gray linoleum floor.

The stairway was at the end of the hall. She started down the steps but stopped as a shadow suddenly blocked the square of light that came from below. She turned and hurried back up the stairs and into the shadowed, deep entrance to one of the rooms. The figure reached the top of the stairs and walked briskly past her and down the corridor. Agatha covered her mouth to repress a giggle.

When the figure had disappeared into one of the rooms, Agatha went to the stairs and down to the landing. Carefully, she peeked around the railing. The desk at the bottom of the steps was empty. Without hesitating, she was down and out the door and into the warm night air.

She ran across the lawn to a small clump of trees. A limb from one of the trees stuck out over the wall that surrounded the yard. Agatha climbed the tree with the skill of a young boy, then inched her way out on the limb. From the wall she let herself down as far as her arms would reach, then dropped to the ground. It was easy. She had done it many times.

The ground was coarse outside the wall and was covered with thick undergrowth. Long, sharp thorns on the bushes would have stopped her there, but someone—probably some children from the town—had made a path along the wall. Agatha followed the path, sometimes having to crawl to keep from tearing her skirt and blouse, until she came to the dirt road in front of the wall.

At the road she turned toward town and, humming gaily, skipped along. She spun herself around, her arms out at her sides and laughed. She was out of that place and free. She started to skip again.

The headlights from a car far down the road gave her a shadow that stretched out in front of her. She stopped and turned to watch the two lights slowly become larger until the car slowed and stopped beside her. A man leaned over and rolled down the window.

“Want a ride?” he asked.

Agatha smiled and shook her head. “No, thank you.” Her voice was soft and sweet, almost like a child’s. “I’m just walking.”

“Okay, but this is a hell of a place for a pretty girl like you to be walking—with that looney place back there.”

She looked up the road the way she had come. “Oh, I’m sure they won’t bother me.”

“Suit yourself.” He rolled up the window and drove off. Agatha watched the tail lights until they turned, far up the road, then she continued on her way, skipping and humming and sometimes singing softly.

It was a long way into town, but it was still early. The sun had just gone down a short while ago and the moon was only starting to push its way above the trees. Agatha hunched her shoulders in delight. She knew the moon would be full

when it got above the trees; she had seen it on the calendar in the lounge.

At the edge of town she passed a tiny house in a small clump of trees, back from the road. The lights were burning and the blinds of one window had not been drawn. Agatha stood on the road watching the old couple inside until they turned out the lights. The two seemed so ancient, and it almost made Agatha cry to know that people could be so old. But she would not be sad—not tonight. It was too beautiful a night not to be happy. She turned down the road, singing, and forgot the old couple.

The town was small, but the main street was bright and very noisy. Agatha did not like the street, especially the noise, but some of the signs fascinated her and she loved to watch them. The one in front of the Mobilgas filling station was her favorite. Under the word “Mobilgas” in large block letters was an enormous red horse with beautiful red wings. The horse was outlined in red neon lights and the wings went up and down in slow, jerky movements. It was a very special horse to Agatha.

After she had watched the sign for awhile, she went on. She came to a laundromat, empty of people, and went in. Someone had put too much soap into one of the machines and heavy suds flowed from a hole in the top and ran down the front and sides. The fluffy river ran to the drain and felt warm and wet on Agatha’s bare feet. As she left the building, she looked back and laughed at the dark footprints she had made on the concrete floor.

She hurried past a bar which was dark inside, but from the open door came the sound of loud, tinny music and men’s rough voices.

The pavement ended and the road became dirt again. The noise and the lights faded and she came to a narrow, wooden bridge. She stopped at the railing and leaned over. She could barely make out the river below. She searched along the ground until she found several small pebbles, then went back to the railing and dropped them over the side. She heard the faint “plunks” and laughed out loud, but

quickly covered her mouth as if she were afraid someone might hear her.

On the far side of the bridge was a path which led along the river. Agatha followed it, starting to sing again softly. The moon was high now and enough light filtered through the trees to make her way visible.

The path followed the river closely for a long way, then forked. Agatha took the branch which turned away from the river. She followed it to a clearing and a grassy bank beside a smaller, slower moving stream. The water was clear there, not muddy like the river, and the light from the moon could penetrate the water and reflect off the pebbles beneath. It was a beautiful and peaceful place. She had found it a long time ago and had gone there when she could ever since.

"Hi," said a small voice behind her, and she whirled around to see a young boy sitting against a tree holding a fishing pole.

She smiled. "Hi," she said and went over to him. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"No." He wore a pair of rolled-up blue jeans and a dirty white T-shirt. His hair was long and shaggy under his straw hat. A pair of black tennis shoes and socks lay on the ground beside him.

"Isn't it late for a little boy like you to be out?" she asked.

"I ain't little," he said crossly.

"I'm sorry."

"I sneaked out," he said after a pause. "You won't tell, will ya?"

"No," she laughed. "I sneaked out too."

She looked out at the water. "Have you caught anything?"

"Naw. I never catch anything. I don't think there's any fish here."

"Oh, I'm sure there are Do you come here often?"

"We just moved here a little while ago What's your name?"

"Agatha. What's yours?"

"Jimmy Huck," he said and extended his hand. She took it. "My dad says ya should always shake hands when ya tell someone yer name."

"Oh," she laughed. "Well, I'm glad to meet you, Jimmy Huck."

"You can call me Jimmy."

"Oh, all right."

"Where do you live?" he asked.

Agatha looked up into the sky and pointed. "Do you see that star? The real bright one."

"Yeh."

"That's where I live."

Jimmy laughed. "Ah, ya do not. People don't live in stars."

"Oh, but they do."

"Then how do ya get up there?"

"Do you know that horse in town—the giant red one with wings?"

"Yeh."

"At night, when the whole town is asleep, he flies down off the sign and takes me to my star."

"Yer just kiddin' me."

"No, I'm not. Cross my heart."

"Well then, what's it like on yer star?"

"Just like it is here. It's always night and very warm. And there aren't any people, so it's always quiet and very peaceful. And there are fish in the streams. Big ones—like this." She stretched her arms out.

"Gee, it must be nice to have a star like that."

"Would you like to go there with me?"

"Could I?"

"I'm sure the red horse wouldn't mind."

There was the sound of someone running on the path behind them. Agatha turned to see a man dressed in white come into the clearing. "They're both here," he shouted back into the darkness, and a woman, also dressed in white, and a woman in a bathrobe hurried into the opening. The woman in the bathrobe screamed and ran to Jimmy. She clutched him to her, pulling him away from Agatha.

"She wouldn't hurt him," the woman in white told her. She went over to Agatha.

"You said she was insane!" the woman in the bathrobe screamed.

"She has merely lost contact with reality."

The woman in white took Agatha toward the path.

"Are ya goin' to yer star now?" Jimmy asked.

Agatha turned to him and smiled. "No, but I'll come back some day and then we'll both go."

The Burning of Winter

by Lynn Thorp

English, Sr.

We're burning today,
Igniting great clumps of the dead undermulch,
Now raked into heaps.
Twined, tangled, grayed leaves and wound weeds in clogged
spiderweb nets
Explode into flame,
Recoiling—now rancidly filling the air with dull smoke.

Laugh! Let them be gone!
Expectant and eager we wait for the spring's
Awakening stir:
Virility coupled with beauty and feminine color:
Each violet bloom,
Soft catkin, swift bird-sweep, bee's buzzing, and tempting
green grass. . . .